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ABSTRACT

The role of Indochinese self-help groups in the Refugee Resettlement Program is examined in this paper. Drawing on the literature dealing with Indochinese self-help groups, the paper reviews the factors which contribute to the formation of these groups, more commonly called Mutual Assistance Associations or MAAs. In addition, the value of MAAs as perceived by both the Indochinese and American communities is discussed. The effect of Federal Refugee program policies on MAAs is also analyzed. The paper closes with a recommendation that more emphasis should be placed on financial support for MAAs and particularly that each State should be encouraged to contract with MAAs for the delivery of social services. (Author/APM)

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INDOCHINESE MUTUAL ASSISTANCE ASSOCIATIONS

TIME FOR A NEW ROLE

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INDOCHINESE MUTUAL ASSISTANCE ASSOCIATIONS:

TIME FOR A NEW ROLE

Summary

The purpose of this paper is to examine the role which Indochinese self help groups have, and should have, in the Refugee Resettlement Program. There is a substantial body of literature concerning self help groups among the earlier refugee and migrant populations, but only recently has any significant amount of work been done on the Indochinese. Both time and space considerations, however, required that a review of the literature be limited to that dealing only with the Indochinese self help groups.

The factors which contribute to the formation of self help groups (more commonly called Mutual Assistance Associations or MAAs) are briefly covered, followed by a discussion of the value of MAAs as perceived by both the Indochinese and American communities. Finally, the effect on MAAs of federal refugee program policies is discussed. The paper closes with the recommendation that more emphasis be placed on financial support for MAAs. Particular attention should be devoted to encouraging the states to contract with MAAs for the delivery of social services. Since 1975 there have been a number of changes in organizational nomenclature. For the sake of simplicity, the abbreviations HHS and ORR, meaning the Department of Health and Human Services and the Office of Refugee Resettlement, respectively, as used here also include their predecessor organizations.

Background

Since the fall of Saigon in April 1975 the United States has allowed over 490,000 Cambodian, Laotian and Vietnamese refugees to enter this country.[1] Unlike most refugees or immigrants, the Indochinese had no established ethnic

[1] Refugee Reports 2 (24 July 1981), p.8.

community in this country. Montero reported in 1979 that only a few scholarly studies on the resettlement of refugees had been conducted. Based on a longitudinal survey conducted between 1975 and 1977, Montero postulated that the Indochinese refugees would pass through three phases of resettlement. Phase 2 is named the Ethnic Enclave, during which Montero predicted that the refugees would form ethnic enclaves in large cities.[2] This theory is supported by Ragas and Maruggi, who found in 1978 that refugees "tend toward community living for, among other reasons, security and cultural preservation."[3] Montero seems to have been right about the enclaves, and, fortunately, more literature has been published since his report was issued.

Mutual Assistance Associations

Hundreds of MAAs have been formed during the past six years. MAAs spring up, reorganize, change names and disappear so quickly that an accurate count is impossible. Some tallies count only incorporated MAAs, others only funded, and still others only active MAAs. A recent study found approximately 500 MAAs around the country, although ORR lists only 205.[4] Regardless of their number, all MAAs, as their name implies, have two major goals: to help each other, and to preserve the culture of their members. MAAs normally start with a vaguely defined organizational purpose (e.g., social, cultural, or religious group) and move to more specific goals as the organization matures.[5]

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[2]Darrel Montero, "The Vietnamese Refugees in America: Patterns of Socio-economic Adaptation," International Migration Review 13 (Winter 1979): p. 624.

[3]Wade R. Ragas and Vincent Maruggi, Vietnamese Refugee Living Conditions in the New Orleans Metro Area, (New Orleans: Division of Business and Economic Research, University of New Orleans, (November 1978)), p.4.

[4]Indochina Refugee Action Center, The Indochinese Mutual Assistance Associations (Washington, D.C. (March 1981)), p. i; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Refugee Resettlement, Operating Handbook (22 March 1981), p.. VII-83.

[5]IRAC, 1981, p.4.

Whatever their problems with adapting to life in the United States, it seems clear that the Indochinese are "familiar with the formation of a variety of groups."[6] In this country the MAA in many ways replaces the extended family upon which Indochinese culture is based, and the ethnic enclave helps in the formation of the MAA. A MAA president says " pride in their 4,000 year old histroy coupled with a deep rooted culture . . . have urged them to flock into community organizations in an attempt to provide mutual support and to preserve their cultural identity."[7] He went on to compare the MAA to a buffer which lessens culture shock and to a buoy to which refugees can cling. Another refugee writes that "the formation of groups of shared culture, language and tradition is in part a minifestation of the refugees' need to feel secure."[8]

The number of MAAs, the impetus behind their formation or their goals, are not particularly important. The significant facts are that the Indochinese began to form MAAs almost as soon as they arrived, that many MAAs have survived the initial years of disorganization and unfamiliarity with American ways, and that there is a consensus that MAAs can play a vital role in the refugee program. A 1979 report said that "refugees who come to this country are able to adjust more effectively if they can be received in a community which is ethnically similar."[9] More recently a report of a survey of MAAs pointed out that "it is only within a refugee's own community that lasting, long range services can

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[6]SRI International, Alternative Approaches to Refugee Resettlement (Menlo Park, CA (15 March 1981)), p. 102.

[7]Nguyen Dinh Thu, "Mutual Assistance Association' Role in Refugee Resettlement," paper presented at the 107th Annual Forum of the National Conference on Social Welfare, Cleveland, 20 May 1980.

[8]Ha Ton Vinh, "Indochinese Mutual Assistance Associations," Journal of Refugee Resettlement 1, p.50

[9]Julia Vadala Taft, David S. North, and David A. Ford, Refugee Resettlement in the U.S.: Time for a New Focus (Washington, D.C.: New Transcentury Foundation (31 July 1979)), p. 44.

lead to successful socio-cultural transition and economic self sufficiency within the American society. Therefore, it is essential, as well as cost effective, that the potential contribution and resettlement role of the MAAs be nurtured and developed."[10]

Support for MAAs

Others have independently arrived at the conclusion. A 1975 conference on Asian immigration held in San Francisco recommended that "support groups composed of Vietnamese immigrants residing in the same communities be utilized for assistance among Vietnamese, while at the same time acting as a voice for local community concerns."[11] (The report by this conference is to be admired not only for its prescience, but also because it contains what is still one of the most extensive bibliographies on refugees available.) A firm which conducted grantsmanship training for refugees in 1979 contended that "community organization is the only lasting support the refugees can depend on."[12] Stein flatly stated that "an underutilized resource in most refugee programs is the refugee community. People tend to do things for refugees, not with them." He went on to say that "despite the fact that refugees have organized many self help organizations, refugees generally are limited to minor roles in resettlement."[13]

More recently the results of another survey showed that MAAs would need " encouragement, financial support and training if they are to provied the kinds

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[10] IRAC, 1981, p. iii.

[11] Research Planning Conference on Asian Immigration, Report (San Francisco (24 June 1975)), p. 43.

[12] Charles W. Soffel and Harvey B. Chess, "Indochinese Refugee Mutual Assistance Associations: Implications for Successful Refugee Resettlement," (San Francisco: Truckee Associates (March 1980)), p. 7.

[13] Barry N. Stein, "Refugee Resettlement Programs and Techniques," (September 1980), p. 94.

of service of which they are capable."[14] A just released report dealing with new approaches to the refugee program makes the point that MAAs are in fact providing many valuable, if indirect, services to their members, particularly in the areas of orienting new arrivals and maintaining mental health.[15]

MAA Problems

While there may be no doubt that MAAs could be an important facet of the refugee resettlement program, there is a problem in that they are chronically underfinanced and under used. One organization concisely identified the problem by saying that "HEW saw fit to recognize the efforts of the new groups, but it never acknowledged their role."[16] Another group said simply that the expertise and skills of the MAAs "ought to be developed."[17] Still another writer saw that "the potential and willingness to do more exists, but without outside aid to develop their capacities and abilities, refugees will be unable to aid their compatriots."[18] Another report stated that MAAs "are excellent resources" and made the recommendation that they be "encouraged and assisted financially."[19] A more recent report found that the vast majority of MAAs have energy and potential, but lack management experitse, adequate training and sufficient funding.[20] An Indochinese leader recently pointed out the inherent vicious circle: MAAs must have funding in order to get started, but funding is withheld until the MAA does get started.[21]

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[14]IRAC, 1981, p. ii. [15]SRI, pp. 70, 96 [16]Soffel and Chess, p. 2.

[17]Indochina Refugee Action Center, Social Adjustment Services, Program Component and Models of Resettlement Services for Refugees, vol. 3, ed. Roger Harmon and Court Robinson Washington, D.C. (February 1981)), p. 10.

[18]Stein, pp. 94-5. [19]Taft, North and Ford, pp. 45, 102.

[20]Indochina Refugee Action Center, The Indochinese Mutual Assistance Associations (Washington, D.C.: (3 January 1980)), p. 14.

[21]Phon A. Nguyen-khoa, "Notes on the Preservation of Vietnamese Culture," paper presented at the Indochinese Technical Assistance Project workshop, Houston, 22 March 1981.

The federal government provides nearly all of the money for the refugee program. The government, however, has been frequently and justifiably criticized for inadequate, untimely and inappropriate funding. During the summer of 1979 HHS conducted a refugee program evaluation. One finding germane here was that 20 percent of the organizations providing services to refugees had no bilingual staff.[22] The results of a followup evaluation done in early 1981 indicate that there has been little improvement during the past year and one half, and that some ideas "like . . .MAA funding" are too new to have produced results.[23] That providing funding to MAAs can be regarded as new typifies ORR treatment of MAAs.

But ORR has always offered some encouragement to MAAs. ORR headquarters has operated a toll free telephone hot line, issued sporadic publications for MAAs and attempted to keep an accurate list of MAAs. But ORR has done little more. It is appropriate here to quote at length from a 1976 memorandum to ORR regional office staff.

> The purpose of this memorandum is to outline a concept for the relationship between the HEW Task Force and the Indo-Chinese Mutual Assistance Associations . . . .
>
> Based on our research to date, it is appropriate to suggest that this is still a formative stage for all such organizations . . . .
>
> The decision to establish communications, or at least to offer the Indo-Chinese Associations a chance to communicate with the Task Force, is predicated on the assumption that Indo-Chinese helping themselves is the surest path to successful resettlement.
>
> . . . it is clear that Task Force efforts to encourage Indo-Chinese organizations must begin with very general types of assistance applicable

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[22]U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, Office of the Inspector General, Indochinese Refugee Assesment, Report to the Secretary, (January 1980), p. 4.

[23]U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Inspector General, and U.S. Department of Education, Office of Management, Service Delivery Assesment on Refugee Resettlement, Report to the Secretary, (March 1981), p. 11.

to many groups in diverse settings. Initial services offered to the Indo-China Associations are:

A. Facilitation of communication among Associations
B. Publications
C. Technical assistance . . . in response to correspondence or telephone calls. . . .

The HEW Task Force will not now publicize any general offers of direct financial assistance to Indo-Chinese Associations. Premature funding may result in debilitating competition for funds . . . . However, none of the above is to suggest that there may not be specific cases in the future in which a reasonable level of assistance might provide great benefit at relatively low cost . . . . The Task Force, in coordination with appropriate Regional personnel, will make recommendations based on the following criteria:

1. The Association appears to have achieved its own clearly defined objectives and identity.
2. It has resolved its internal problems and has the enthusiastic support of a significant membership.
3. The Association has already explored and exhausted other possible funding sources.
4. The Association has a clearly beneficial, specific and feasible proposal and/or program. (A current program of proven worth . . . is more likely to prove cost effective than a new proposal.) 24

The initial services listed as A,B, and C, above, were essentially valueless to the MAAs. The third criterion of the last paragraph was one not required of non-Indochinese groups, while the fourth criterion, of course, ensured that MAAs which were not funded, would not be.

This kind of thinking persists. During federal fiscal year 1980, for example, 105 grant projects which provided services to Indochinese were approved. Of these grants, only six were awarded to Indochinese MAAs.[25] As recently as this year one report put forth reservations about funding MAAs because competition for funds could divert MAAs from their original objective, cause inter-MAA

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[24]Acting Director, HEW Refugee Task Force, "Indo-Chinese Mutual Assistance Associations," memorandum to Regional Directors, 21 June 1976.

[25]U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, Social Security Administration, Office of Refugee Affairs, Indochinese Refugee Assistance Program, Report to the Congress, 31 December 1979, pp. 41-6.

or result in confirming some organizations and leaders as spokesmen for the community.[26] This reasoning would seem to apply as well to American groups.

MAAs can be high quality service providers if given the opportunity. As has already been discussed, they and their supporters have long stressed that inadequate funding is the only barrier. In one survey, 60 percent of the MAAs responding gave funding as the top priority need of their organization.[27] A recent report on the refugee program, in discussing three individual MAAs, said that one, "with a minimal amount of assistance . . . could provide a valuable community service . . . and fufull the goals it has set for itself."[28]

"Cognizant of their potential growth and their vital role in the resettlement process, new ways of assisting the MAA and utilizing the resources of these associations are being explored by the Office of Refugee Resettlement."[29] ACTION, using a transfer of funds from ORR, has awarded nine seed money grants of about $5,000 to MAAs during the past six months. More importantly, ORR has awarded grants of up to $50,000 to 22 MAAs during this fiscal year. These grants are one year only funding and are designed to "enhance the administrative and technical capacities of MAAs to deliver services."[30] The Cambodian Association of America has received a large grant, which is being subgranted to local MAAs, to resettle refugees. In addition, about one dozen MAAs are providing services under contract with state agencies. Several of the latter group are out performing their counterparts in the traditional voluntary agencies, and have proven conclusively that MAAs are capable of performing refugee program activities. MAAs are also learning the fine art of grantsmanship. They are not only getting

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[26] SRI, pp. 101-4. [27] IRAC, 1981, p. 14.

[28] IRAC, 1980, p. 11. [29] Operating Handbook, p. VII-83.

[30] U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Refugee Resettlement, Federal Register 45, 6 August 1980. pp. 52295-6.

better at applying for refugee program money at both the state and federal levels, they have also learned to apply for funding from private sector sources.

Although it is not easily found, there is a great deal of evidence that the most effective and efficient means of integrating a refugee into his new culture is through close contact with, and the assistance of, others from his native country who have preceeded him. The Indochinese refugees, and others who have been involved in the refugee program, agree that MAAs have the talent to perform the task, if only provided with the opportunity. "There is a vast and actual energy within the MAAs."[31]

Some MAAs have nearly six years of organizational history, several have proven track records as deliverers of services. There are now large numbers of highly qualified refugees who could, and should, be on the inside, helping to make policy. The constant problem has been lack of financial support. It is easy to place the blame on ORR, but not entirely correct. At the beginning of the program the voluntary agencies were the natural group to turn to for service provision.[32] By the time MAAs had gotten organized and were ready to compete for funds, habit and momentum had combined with erratic funding and program authorization to block them out.

The Refugee Resettlement Program, however, is entering a new era. The Refugee Act of 1980 has established a permanent program and recognized the fact that refugees will continue to come to the United States. At the same time, the budget for fiscal year 1981 has already been cut substantially, and further reductions are expected in 1982.

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[31] Thu, paper.

[32] Kermit F. Shotts, "Implementation of the Indochinese Refugee Assistance Program," Topics in Human Services Administration, ed. Charldean Newell and James J. Glass, (Denton, TX (1981)), p. 74.

Conclusion

The proponderance of literature supports the theory that MAAs are highly qualified for the role of service deliverers. MAA members share the background and experiences and speak the same languages as the refugee population at large. For these reasons they are generally more aware of the assistance needed by refugees and more sensitive to the problems of refugees and better prepared to deal with them. As MAAs are composed of refugees, they have had problems with organizational stability and with their members unfamiliarity with life in the United States. Many MAAs by now, however, have a large membership and have overcome these obstacles. The core membership is always amazingly committed to helping other refugees, sometimes almost fanatically so. The core members are also usually among the most successfully resettled, and thus are in the best position to offer help to other refugees.

The asset which MAAs have most needed and most lacked is money. Funding through the Refugee Resettlement Program, from either the federal or state level, has been irregular and almost accidental. The efforts of ORR in recent months are laudable, but are not part of a comprehensive plan to develop the capacities of MAAs. Yet the record shows that MAAs, when they are funded, can operate high quality and well-managed programs. The handful of MAAs which are presently functioning as service providers are providing English language, job placement and other services which are at least equal to those being offered by the more traditional service providers.

Recommendation

ORR should initiate a planned effort to award funds for Refugee Resettlement Program special projects and social service delivery to MAAs. As noted above, some tentative steps in this direction have already been taken, but a great deal more could be done. The area offering the greatest potential, both for funding

dollars and for funded MAAs, is purchased service contracts with the state agencies. ORR regional office staff should encourage state agency staff to develop contracts with, or request proposals from, MAAs. Where feasible, services now being provided by voluntary agencies could be replaced by MAA-provided services. This process may be made easier, as there is some indication that voluntary agencies will be less interested in competing for the reduced program funds which will be available in coming years. An additional benefit to be gained from contracting with MAAs in a period of budgetary reductions is that they are usually able to deliver the same services at a lower cost. In sum, as another writer so eloquently stated, "There is a vast potential within the mutual assistance associations. If only this talent can be nurtured, trained and funded, the benefits will be enormous. Indochinese people who know their way around in American society will ultimately be the best guides to future Indochinese refugees."[33]

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[33]IRAC, 1980, p. 17.

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